Canadian Chamber of Commerce | Chambre de Commerce du Canada

CANADIAN BUSINESS RESILIENCE NETWORK | RÉSEAU DE RESILIENCE DES ENTREPRISES CANADIENNES

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Crisis Communications Planning Guide

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce used, and adapted, this guide to develop its Crisis Communications Plan.

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Step 1: Identify if the Situation Is an Issue or a Crisis

While they are sometimes used interchangeably, an "issue" and a "crisis" present very different operational and communications challenges, affect how you respond as an organization and have very different impacts on your brand and reputation. A shared understanding of the difference between the two will help you to more quickly determine what is a crisis (versus an issue) and then implement your crisis communications plan.

	Definition	Operational Impact	Reputational Impact
Issue	A negative situation and/or event that is unlikely to have long-term negative impact on the organization's operations, brand and reputation. An issue can evolve into a crisis if not managed effectively and efficiently.	Does not interfere with day-to-day operations. Can be managed at a staff level. Minimal, if any, impact on safety or long-term relationship with employees, members, stakeholders. Often allows you the time to explore options and gather all of the facts before you act or respond.	May be embarrassing, lead to short-term negative reactions from media, stakeholders, members, but alone an issue is unlikely to cause long-term reputational damage.
Crisis	A negative situation that threatens the long-term health, operations or viability of the organization.	Halts or interferes with the day-to-day operations of the organization. Requires the full attention of senior leadership, including Board members. Decision-making has to happen quickly, and often without all of the facts.	Threatens irreparable damage to the reputation of the organization. Threatens to impact the organization's financial health/viability.

Step 2: Identify the Crisis Response Team

While a crisis halts or interferes with day-to-day operations of your organization, and requires the attention of your organization's senior leadership, not every employee has a role to play in making decisions about how the crisis response should be managed. In order to respond efficiently and effectively, it is vital that the makeup of your organization's Crisis Response Team (CRT) is determined beforehand, and that each member of the team understands their role and responsibilities. This will allow you to respond quickly, prevent confusion, ensure accountability and streamline decision-making as the crisis response is developed and executed.

In a crisis, ready-access to critical information and a range of perspectives is important. In order for the CRT to respond effectively, then, it must consist of staff with a global view of your organization, as well as specific skill sets and expertise. In order to be efficient, the team is naturally a small segment of your organization's staff. However, that does not mean the CRT is solely responsible for executing your organization's response. Rather, members of the CRT can and will delegate tasks to other members of the organization as required. They remain accountable, though, for ensuring the tasks are completed appropriately, and for reporting back to the CRT.

Crisis Response Team Members

CRT Role[1]	Responsibilities
CRT Leader	Guides the team; leads CRT discussions; assigns tasks; liaises with other members of your organization's executive leadership and board of directors, key external stakeholders (if/as required); responsible for final decision-making (including course-of-action and messaging).
Administration/Record Keeper	Responsible for keeping detailed notes of CRT discussions; recording decisions made; logistics for CRT meetings/calls; ensuring CRT has food, water, etc.; transportation/travel if/as required.
Finance/Legal	Responsible for overseeing and informing any financial decisions that are required and for tracking the financial impact/implications of the crisis on your organization; responsible for liaising with legal counsel if/as required and for providing counsel's advice to the CRT.

[1] Each of your organization's areas of operations must be represented on the CRT. As the organization evolves these roles may change or new positions may be added.

Operations	Responsible for ensuring your organization's operational requirements (including IT, building, telephones, etc.) are being addressed; monitors and reports to CRT on the impact of the crisis on your operations; works with HR (and communications) to ensure employees' needs are being addressed; responsible for overseeing the implementation of the business continuity and recovery plans.
Communications	Responsible for recommending the communications response, including messaging and tactics (across all channels); coordinating the production of communications materials; media and social monitoring and reporting to the CRT; acts a media spokesperson as required; provides media coaching to other spokespeople if/as required.

Step 3: Activate the Crisis Response Team (CRT)

Following is a simple process for identifying a potential crisis, assessing it and activating the CRT.

Once a crisis is identified and the CRT is activated, the objective is to communicate with key stakeholders/target audiences within an hour, followed by regular communications as required throughout the crisis.

The process is simple, and straightforward, with specific tasks assigned to each CRT member.

Stage	Activity
Identification	• A potential crisis is identified (by any member of the organization) through the Organization's social, media and member/network monitoring channels. • **If:** the incident will not impact day-to-day operations, is not a threat to people, property or presents minimal risk to your organization's brand/reputation and does not require senior leadership intervention, **then it is <u>not</u> a crisis**. • **If:** the incident will disrupt or interfere with normal day-to-day operations, presents a threat to people, property and/or reputation of your organization, requires the attention/intervention of senior leadership, **then the incident <u>is</u> <u>a crisis</u>**.
Activation	• CRT Leader is informed of the situation and evaluates the information presented and the potential risk to your organization. • CRT Leader activates the CRT as appropriate. • CRT convenes in person or via conference call as required.
Analysis	• CRT Leader leads the analysis of the situation, asking: 1. What happened – establish the "Five Ws" (who, what, when, where, why)? 2. What is the source of our information (i.e. how do we know what we know, and can we trust the source?) 3. What other information do we need? 4. What needs to be done to address/rectify the situation? 5. Who needs to know? What do they need to know? • Each member of the CRT provides a perspective based on their area of responsibility and any updates on their area of responsibility as appropriate. • CRT administrator/record keeper tracks decisions taken and keeps meeting minutes.
Execution	• CRT Leader assigns responsibility for next steps to specific team members, based on situation analysis. • Media/social media monitoring is activated.

	• Communications is tasked with providing recommendations for messaging and approach to communicating. • Priority is to communicate with key internal/external audiences within an hour. • Review stakeholder/audience map to ensure responsibility for communicating with each has been assigned. • CRT administrator/record keeper tracks decisions taken, responsibilities assigned, and keeps meeting minutes. • Time/location/dial-in for next meeting is set.
Monitoring	• As crisis unfolds and your organization takes steps to respond to it, monitoring of audience/stakeholder reactions is critical. • CRT members monitor their areas of responsibility for new information, changing circumstances, etc. and report to CRT as required. • Social and media monitoring is ongoing and communications lead provides updates to CRT, along with proposed corrective actions as required.

Crisis Messaging Guidelines

In the event of a crisis, all of your communications – internal or external, written or verbal – will be closely scrutinized. How you respond to a crisis – operationally as well as from a communications perspective – will determine the impact the crisis has on your brand and reputation.

That means responding quickly (your first message should be issued within an hour of the crisis emerging, even if it is only to say you are aware of the situation, evaluating it and will be communicating when you have more information), sticking to the facts and ensuring your messages are clear and focused on what you are doing.

Following are guidelines to help focus your communications so that they are timely, persuasive, effective and do not contribute to making the crisis situation worse.

Principles of Effective Crisis Communications

- **Communicate quickly** – you <u>always</u> have something you can say.
- **Establish timelines for communicating** – tell media/stakeholders when they can expect to hear from you next; uncertainty can encourage them to look elsewhere for information.
- **Halt other communications** – in a crisis you should be communicating only about the crisis and your response to it. <u>All</u> other communications should be paused.
- **Use all of our channels** – audiences get information from different sources, use all of your channels to communicate a consistent message.
- **Short and to the point** – Audiences are looking for information they can use to understand the situation, and evaluate your response. Get to the point quickly, and focus only on relevant content.

Elements of an Effective Message in a Crisis

Every message should be built on the following three pillars: *Context – Care – Action*

- **Context (what you know)** – Acknowledge and describe the situation in your words; acknowledge your role in creating/contributing to the situation (if appropriate).
- **Motive (what you care about**) – Acknowledge and express your concern for those affected by the situation. If appropriate, speak to your values as an organization.
- **Action (what you are doing about it)** – In clear, concise terms describe what you are doing to address the situation and help those affected by it.

Social Media Guidelines

In today's environment, social media is absolutely necessary for communicating in a crisis. Recognizing that social channels are where most people will turn to first for information in the event of a crisis, you must be prepared to leverage the advantages social offers. These include:

Speed – In a crisis, the ability to respond quickly is important to getting your message out to counter misinformation and establish your voice as part of any discourse around the crisis.

Message Control – Social media allows you to speak directly to your audiences, without the filter of the media. It is not a substitute for media relations, but a complement to other forms of communications (media relations, internal emails, etc.).

Listening and Learning – Social media provides you with a channel not just for communicating directly to your audiences, but also provides them with a channel for communicating with you. Social monitoring tools also allow you to monitor stakeholder reaction to your crisis response and to adjust your messaging accordingly. That includes detecting and correcting misinformation.